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THE RUINS OF TULOOM

By GEORGE P. HOWE

THE ruined city of Tuloom is situated on the coast of Yucatan, Province of Quintana Roo, just south of the south end of Cozumel Island, and slightly north of Ascension Bay, and is marked on all charts of the coast. It was first mentioned by Juan de Grijalva in 1518¹ who says: "We ran along day and night, and the next day towards sunset we saw a burg or village so large that Seville would not appear larger or better. The same day we arrived at a bay, near which was a tower, the highest we had seen. We discovered a bay where a fleet would be able to enter." Ascension is the only bay on the coast that would answer this description. In 1840 the city was visited by Stephens and Catherwood.²

A body of Mexican troops is said to have landed there in 1900. Beyond this I do not know that it has ever been visited.

I believe that Tuloom is the center of a distinct archeological province consisting of the coastal area south of Cape Catoche, extending probably to the Rio Hondo on the borders of British Honduras, including the islands along the coast and reaching some distance inland. The other cities known to be in this area are El Mecco, Tamul, Ina, north Tuloom, and Boca Pilar and Bacalar to the southward. In addition we have the less important ruins on the islands of Cozumel and Mugerres and vague reports of large ruins in the interior.

Until the area has been more thoroughly explored, it would be rash to say what its most characteristic features are, but the unique characteristics of Tuloom and the ruins of Cozumel may be taken as indications in this respect. One feature of interest in this area is the probably long period of occupation. These ruins are the only ones definitely mentioned as inhabited at the time of the coming of the Spaniards; and perhaps later, for at the taking of Boca

¹ Report published in Paris in 1838.

² Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, vol. 2, page 387.

Pilar, after the destruction of a chicle camp by the Indians (in 1903 I think), a sailor who was with the attacking force says they found "candles burning in the Indian church." I can not make out from him whether the Indians actually occupied the large buildings of the city or merely had a village near by. As regards antiquity an initial series found at Tuloom, which I shall discuss later, leads me to believe that it was a city of very early date.

Tuloom may be reached from Progreso by getting a passage either on a Mexican government vessel (about two days slow steaming) or by an occasional trading sloop (three to five days sail) to San Miguel village on the island of Cozumel. At Cozumel

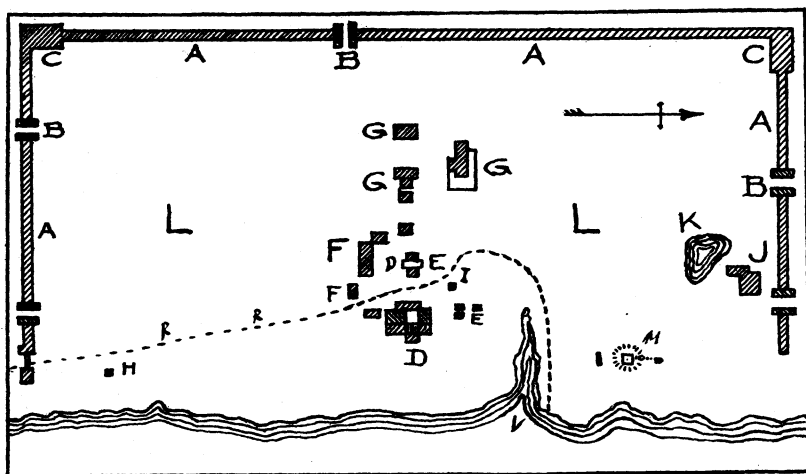


FIG. 77.—Map of Tuloom after Stephens: A-A walls, B-B gates, C-C watch towers, D mound with no building on it, E-E casas, F-F casas, G-G buildings not explored by us, K cenote, J large guard house, M shrine measured, L-L thick woods, H completely ruined house, R-R route from ravine V to south beach.

there are several vessels for charter at from twelve to twenty-four dollars (Mexican) a day. This price includes the crew and their provisions. Plenty of laborers can be obtained at two dollars (Mexican) a day and their food.

Tuloom is about twenty-four hours sail from San Miguel. It would be well, however, to be well supplied with permits from higher Mexican authorities before attempting to carry on any work in this region, as otherwise the local port authorities would be very troublesome.

On arriving at Tuloom a safe anchorage for vessels not drawing more than four or five feet of water will be found just south of the Castillo, formed by a coral bar that, starting from a point half a mile to the southwest, makes out in a northerly direction until almost abreast of the Castillo. The tides in this region are slight and need not be taken into account. There are two possible beaches for landing. The one lying north of the Castillo would be the most convenient, but unfortunately, just missing the shelter of the coral bar, suffers the disadvantage of considerable surf at times. The south beach lying at a quarter of a mile south of the Castillo is sheltered by the bar.

The circuit of the walls that surround the city on three sides is about a mile. In addition to this, there are said to be more buildings outside than there are inside the walls, but these I did not see with

the exception of two small watch towers on shore, apparently duplicates of one inside.

As is shown in Stephens' chart (fig. 77), the walls on three sides and the sea on the fourth form a rectangle of which the Castillo is the center. Beyond the wings of the Castillo, which face west, are a series of smaller buildings, facing south, north, and east respectively, about a court, in the center of which is a mound with no trace of a building on it, but with traces of steps on all four sides. Stephens' chart (in so far as I was able to check it up) seems remarkably accurate, considering the difficulties of work in so dense a jungle and the short time he was able to give to it. I should



FIG. 78.—Walls near southeast end showing construction without mortar.

care to amend it only by saying that the buildings marked *E, E* on the north side of the court are more extensive than one would infer from his chart, making the arrangement of the court slightly more symmetrical.

The buildings at Tuloom show two types of construction, namely, the typical Maya vault, and the flat roof supported by columns. The buildings using the Maya vault are for the most part in an excellent state of preservation, while all the flat roofs have fallen.



FIG. 79.—Guard house at southwest angle.

A feature of Tuloom is the complete absence of high pyramids. The buildings rest on rather low foundation mounds, steep on all sides and approached by one or more flights of steps. These mounds are faced with smooth cut stone, often panelled at the sides. The backs of the buildings are almost flush with the back of the mound.

Exterior stone stairways with low stone balustrades are used wherever it is desirable for an ascent, and are for the most part in good condition. No interior stairways were seen. The sacrificial pyramid in the center of the court shows steps on all four sides.

There were no buildings that can be described as typically residential unless, perhaps, the guardhouse at the northeast angle might be so regarded. The walls are still in an excellent state of preservation, except at the points where they approach the sea. They are made of comparatively small flat pieces of rough-cut

stone without mortar (fig. 78). At the northwest and southwest angles small guardhouses are built on the walls (figs. 79 and 80). The southeast gate described by Stephens has completely fallen, but the others all remain. The gates, which are about three feet wide, strike one as being very narrow until one reflects that these people had no beasts of burden. The lintel of the gate is always a single flat stone. On each side of the entrance the wall projects slightly outward and inward, making a narrow passage through which people could enter in single file. No traces of wooden gates for closing these entrances remain.

The wider doorways are supported by columns. The lintels are of wood, stone, or wood and stone combined, where wall thickness makes greater breadth desirable. The stone slab lies in the center with wooden slabs on both sides. No suggestion of carving was seen on any of the lintels.

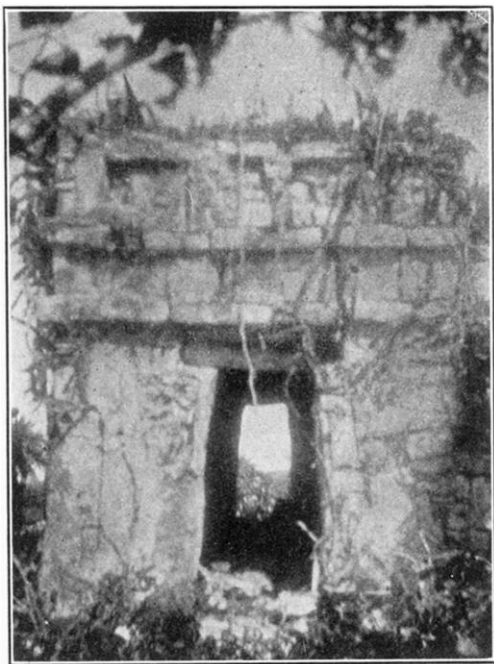


FIG. 80.—Guard house on northwest angle.

The rectangular wall openings for ventilation occurred in the upper chamber of the Castillo on the sea side.

Stone benches seem very much in use around the sides and back walls of the rooms of the larger buildings.

Stone altars for burning copal in the form of basins are common, usually found full of ashes.

Where the Maya vault is employed, it is identical with that found throughout the area, having the typical shoulder and zapote poles set in the walls as supports.

No roof combs or flying façades exist.

The decoration is comparatively slight here as compared with other Maya sites, possibly because the stone is less suitable for carving. It consists mostly of coral and highly fossilized limestone readily worked for building purposes but not suitable for decoration. This difficulty was in some degree overcome by roughly carving the object to be decorated in stone, then covering it with stucco.

Wall paintings seem to have been common, but, save in one building, are largely obliterated.

As is usual with Maya buildings we have the plain lower and decorated upper zone. All the buildings here and one at Cozumel

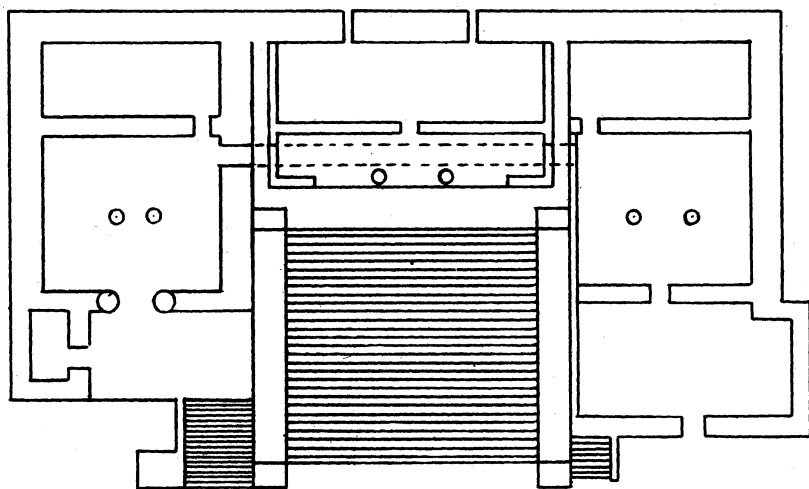


FIG. 81.—Ground plan of Castillo. Scale of measurements taken from Stephens.

show remarkable similarity in the top of the upper zone, which I think will prove characteristic of this area. This upper façade is divided into four parts as is shown in figure 80. Frequently over the door is the figure of a god done in stone covered with stucco.

The Castillo (fig. 81) is built partly on a natural elevation, partly on an artificial foundation platform, back to the sea, and consists of a main building and two wings. The main building is approached by a flight of steps wider than the building itself. The upper building entrance is supported by two round columns, the base of the right one projecting outward in a mass of rude

stone, suggesting a serpent's head (which may have been finished in stucco). The tops show a rude projection also suggesting the possibility of feathers or rattles done in stucco. I am not at all sure that these were serpent columns, but am inclined to think so. Over the central door is the figure of a god in the position of a man diving. This figure occurs in two other places in Tuloom and, so far as I know, is not seen elsewhere. He wears a rather elaborate head dress. Over the other two doors are niches that probably once contained images.

The interior of the building is divided into two corridors, the outer six feet, and the inner nine feet wide, united by a single doorway. Across the ends of the outer chamber and across three sides of the inner chamber run stone benches. The walls of the inner chamber are pierced by square outlets commanding the sea. I saw no traces of wall painting here or the "prints of the red hand" mentioned by Stephens. The wings, though probably of more recent construction, are much more ruinous than the main building, the roofs having fallen, as their wooden roof-beams have given way.

Their walls show traces of once extensive wall paintings. We found a passage not mentioned by Stephens, passing from the north to the south wing under the stairway, and in the middle of this another ruined doorway or break in the wall, possibly leading back to a chamber under the main Castillo. On account of the darkness and the fact that our matches were wet, we were unable to explore this. Because of the shortness of our stay it was impossible to explore or even make plans of the main buildings found. I shall therefore comment briefly on those shown in Stephens' chart (I found no others) and call attention to such points of interest as occur to me.

We landed at a point on the north beach and, entering the ravine mentioned by Stephens, passed up by the buildings marked *E* in his chart referred to as "building on the left with old walls visible in different places."¹ These old walls seem to show more extensive buildings than are indicated on the chart. One building is in excellent repair and shows traces of wall painting on the out-

¹ Stephens, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 389.

side, with some remarkably well preserved ones on the inside. Over the door of this building the same diving god appears as that over the Castillo. The wall paintings inside are in as good state of preservation as those of the Temple of Tigers at Chichen Itza. The subjects, however, are quite different, consisting mainly of gods, and pictures of a somewhat religious nature.

In one of the smaller buildings, marked *F* on the chart, we found the tablets thus referred to by Stephens: "In another house lying on the ground were the fragments of two tablets of the same character as those at Labphak."¹ It was nearly dark when we found these

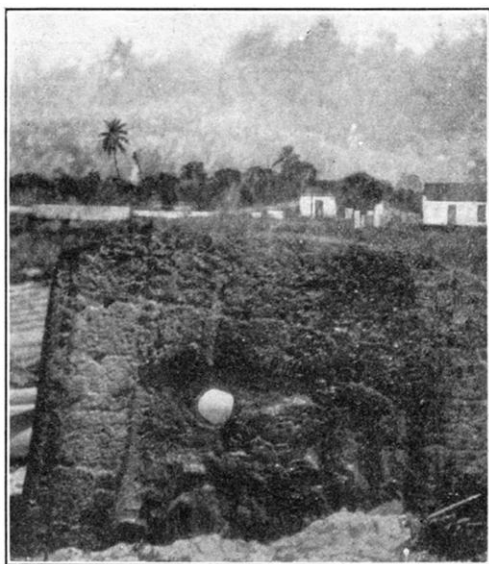


FIG. 82.—Fragment of tablet showing initial series reading 9.6.10.0.0. The series runs from above downward on the left hand side of the picture.

tablets and at that time I did not recognize their true character. It was only just before leaving that I took them out to the sunlight and was able to make out their real importance. The largest fragment shows an initial series reading 9.6.10.0.0 making 8 Ahau 13 Pax. The day and month signs are not shown on the fragment. The photograph (fig. 82) unfortunately does not make this clear.

The other fragment is more broken, but on one of the pieces I saw a large introductory glyph of an initial series. Both of these tablets can, I believe, be pieced together entirely.

Of the buildings marked *G* on the chart I was able to reach only one, that shown in the print opposite page 393 of Stephens, which again shows the diving god (not accurately drawn in Stephens)

¹ Stephens, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

on the wall over the door. I saw no tablets (mentioned by him) inside, though they may well be there.

On the second day of my visit I made a circuit of the walls of which the description in Stephens is remarkably accurate. The southeastern gate is entirely ruined, but all the others are in good shape, as are the two watch-towers at the angles. On completing the circuit, at guardhouse *J* we saw reason to fear an Indian attack and reluctantly decided to leave. The Senote, *K*, still exists, full of dirty, brackish water.

The building and altar at *I* were visited on the first day ashore, and are in most respects correctly described by Stephens (p. 407). The structure was built on a natural eminence overlooking the sea and rested on a low platform. It consists of a single chamber containing an altar for burning copal. Here I took a few measurements as follows: Chamber, 8 feet 5 inches by 6 feet; height to apex of roof 8 feet; height of door, 3 feet 10 inches, width 3 feet. Altar measurements: Basin slab, 3 feet 3 inches by 2 feet 4 inches. Stone slab in front of altar, 4 feet 6 inches long. The basin of the altar was full of old ashes (probably copal), but contained no other articles. Before the door, hidden in scrub, I found a "pineapple altar" like that described by Stephens (p. 407) but saw no reason to believe, as he apparently does, that it had been put to recent use.

On first thoughts it would seem obvious that the walls at Tuloom were built primarily for defence, but I am inclined to doubt this for the following reasons: First, there are only two watch towers and these are not stationed at points particularly liable to attack, such as the gates, but at the angles of the walls; furthermore there are no loopholes for arrows on the outer sides. In addition, it is reported, that there are more ruins outside the walls than within them. There is plenty of unoccupied space inside, which seems opposed to the fortification theory. While it is possible that there may be buildings inside the wall not seen by Stephens or myself, I am of the opinion that they are neither numerous nor large, for on my departure I cut across the country from the north beach, passing west to the Castillo and through the woods to the south wall encountering but one small ruin on the way. This may have been building *H* of Stephens' chart. Another point against

the fortification theory is that obviously not one of the buildings inside the walls was built for purposes of defense. I believe that the area within the walls was a sacred place for the entire section.

Outside the wall on the way to the south beach I passed a large pile of potsherds that would doubtless repay examination. Outside the walls to the northward are two small towers, apparently exactly similar to the one I measured north of the ravine. A little beyond these is said to be a well of good water.

No one can realize more fully than I the extreme superficiality of the work I was able to do at Tuloom, and my only excuse for publishing it is to call attention to the large and important area of Maya culture as yet unstudied. To carry on work in this region it is necessary to have the assistance of the Mexican authorities to the extent of allowing an escort of about thirty soldiers for work at Tuloom, Ina, and Boca Pilar. This would be absolutely necessary, as the Indians are extremely hostile and live in the immediate vicinity. I am convinced that any party not fully prepared to defend itself would certainly be attacked before working long at any of these places.

It might be well to describe some of the reasons for our short stay. On the beach we found many human footprints and freshly cut sticks, showing that it was frequently visited in search of turtle eggs. The city is in the midst of a very dense jungle and progress is made only by the constant use of machetes. We cut a passage up the steps to the Castillo, where we obtained a splendid view of the sea. Our examination of the buildings to the northwest of the court was continued until darkness compelled us to go aboard our boat for the night.

At about 9 P. M. we were disturbed by seeing a fire lighted for about ten minutes and then put out, on a headland about a mile and a half to the northward, where the men said was a well. We took this to be a signal.

The next morning we started to make the circuit of the walls, landing at the south beach. While on the north wall we saw a white flag on a hill a couple of miles to the northwest of us in the direction in which the village was supposed to lie. My companion, Mr Parmelee, then told me that, as we were landing in the boat

that morning, he had seen a white flag waved at the Castillo for a moment. It was evident that these were signals made, not for our benefit, but for that of others, as the flags were placed in positions where we would not have seen them except by accident. After a brief consultation with our men, who all agreed that an attack was imminent, we decided to finish our work hurriedly and leave. The remainder of the time was spent in bringing the tablets out into the



FIG. 83.—Ruin of small shrine with grotesque god on pillar. Ranch Santa Rita, Cozumel Island.

light and photographing them. After this we sent off all the men but one in the first boat from the north beach. Then, with our remaining man, we passed up to the south beach through the woods and embarked.

The use of white and black flags in signalling has been reported of the Indians in this vicinity. Grijalva says that the Indians of the coast signalled to him with flags. When Mr Holmes and Mr E. H. Thompson were off Tuloom on Mr Armour's yacht, they saw flags used as signals. I have no doubt that the party camped

on the point discovered our presence and sent a man up to the Castillo to find out our numbers when we came ashore, and then signalled back a report to the village. An attack, I believe, would inevitably have followed had we waited a few hours longer.

During my stay at Cozumel I visited a small ruin at *Rancho Santa Rita*, on the north end of the island, where I took a few photographs. One of these (fig. 83) shows a supporting column carved with the grotesque figure of a god, more suggestive of Mexico than Yucatan. The building is situated on a low artificial pyramid.

In closing I wish to express my thanks to Mr E. H. Thompson, of Merida, to Mr W. B. Young, agent of the Ward line, Progreso, to Mr Blake, manager of the *Ferrocarriles Unidos de Yucatan*, and to Señor Louis Medina, for their kindness to me during my stay in Merida; and to Mr Oscar Caldwell, of Caldwell and Bonastre, for his helpfulness at Cozumel. To Mr William D. Parmelee, who was with me through the entire trip merely for pleasure, I owe more than to anyone else such success as I have had.

BOSTON, MASS.